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“Ephemeral Heritages”

## Should We Strive to Ensure that Works of Ephemeral Heritage Last? Or Should We Move on... Without Looking Back?

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Abstract: for this first issue of the journal *Hybrid*, this paper highlights my art and obsolescence issues encountered by artists who work with new digital media and particularly the internet. Preserving their work becomes an issue considering that techniques constantly evolves at a frantic rhythm, as well as machines themselves, software and know-how resulting from them. This evolution determines esthetic parameters themselves. This change of paradigm compels artists and every human being to question durability and archiving in a constantly moving society which favors real time and somehow relates to the wisdom, even lucidity, of Buddhist philosophy...

Keywords: interactif, network, sociological art, territory, time.

## Full text (PDF format)

With this contribution, I wish to offer a practical and concrete illustration of the topic of ephemeral heritage —a practical illustration of the problems that digital artists face in terms of the permanent obsolescence of the products that they create. I will endeavor to do so following preliminary remarks intended to briefly recall the nature of these problems, which arise from a number of sources: the changing speed of computer calculation, changing software, changing tools for creation as well as changes in how they are configured for the treatment of digital “material,” and transformations in standards for the various viewing formats. Or they may more simply be due to harmful losses of information incurred by human error or various accidents of the electronic variety —as well as the lack of conviction, discipline and/or skills of the technical intermediaries that artists must turn to, at times blocking source codes from being shared between programmers and artists. This particular problem raises the fundamental question of the very nature of the digital work, what constitutes its substance. And lastly, the lack of minimum financial means to conserve productions is yet another problem —and a chronic situation, given that this type of work does not yet command a veritable market, and institutions have often failed to meet needs in this area, at least in my own experience.

In contrast with works of the past whose material format implied a certain amount of temporal stability, the nature of so-called digital works is intrinsically connected, in time, to the tools that help produce them. The tool is part of the work, and is on the one hand made up of material elements, electronic elements, chips, diodes, sensors, ferrous cables, silicon, etc., and on the other hand, of mathematical procedures, pure abstractions entirely lacking body and matter, known as software. The happy hybridization of the two constitutes the type of machines that simultaneously serve as the format, concept, and, as it were, soul of the works produced. If it happens that one of these hybridized tangible or intangible elements fails and that the machine (the concerned tool) ceases to work, the work disappears at the same time, reduced to the status of conceptual work at best. In this case, should the material remains of the machine be presented to art lovers, alongside the programming partitions transcribed onto paper via printer or by hand (for the nostalgic)? An approach such as this one, intended to compensate for the non-functioning computer tool, would be but a ruse, as the work in question could only exist as such given the working tool.

For the creation as well as the upkeep of their works, artists must turn to computer technicians. This has also long been the case for films, where the director is a conductor overseeing a number of human “tools.” It is not at all necessary —or even

useful, some would say— to be both an artist-director as well as technician in order to produce a “genius” work.

However, little by little, digital art has been overtaken by an unfortunate intermingling (influenced by the prevailing technical criteria that we are subject to) of these two functions: one attributed to art and artists, the other strictly encompassing scientific and technical creation. It is often observed that the concepts governing art are outshone by technical performance, which incorrectly functions as art and is presented as such. Lest I be mistaken, I wish to add that clearly, some creators demonstrate substantial inventiveness in their own area—that of information technology— but this area has nothing in common with that of the performative creativity of art, as far as I know.

This state of affairs highlights the confusion in terms of genres and values that we are witnessing within our societies. It is certainly still necessary to be able to define what art is. Thinking about how Marcel Duchamp transformed an industrial object (his bottle-holder, for example) into a work of art, we are still waiting for a computer specialist to do the same with a protocol. When this happens, and only when this happens, the computer specialist in question will be able to claim dual status as artist and technician. This could very well happen tomorrow, to my mind, if ever the context is favorable (as art itself is essentially a question of ideological context rather than scientific truths); but this scenario has yet to translate into a reality.

To get back to the topic of ephemeral heritage, is it now necessary to proceed with *heritage preservation*, given the degradation and crumbling over time that works inevitably undergo? In a society where the exponential acceleration of processes leads us to increasingly experience this somewhat vain nostalgia for diehard preservation in real time, are we being led to contemplate our future through the rearview mirror rather than taking cognizance of a condition that is increasingly renewed in a contingent present?

Instead of devoting our thought, our powers and our energy to the past and its “heritage” values, in a quickly changing world, might it not be wiser to quickly learn to cope, in order for new—ephemeral— values allowing for transitory living, not to mention survival, to develop? This is a question that I am asking in all seriousness (and with complete naiveté), rather than affirming in the strictest sense. For reasons of political correctness, this affirmation may be easily concealed by our peers, taking the form of a silent, skeptical and sometimes painful questioning. In short, are we doomed to live or survive in a cocoon of unchanging heritage values that fit us no better than they do the incessant movement of a world in which we must seek out our paths? Blindly seeking out these paths with

hands feeling for a *before-us* made up of an imperceptible matter, in perpetual becoming and change?

Once the relativeness of these losses has been evaluated and their importance minimized, via the dual effect of sharp lucidity and in light of realistic wisdom, let us now move onto practical exercises taking the form of a concrete demonstration of the pure and simple disappearance, or degradation, of some of my websites, proceeding in chronological fashion, in order to consider what is left. Only the websites (works) best representing the points made here will be mentioned.

Procedure used: here, I provide relevant information immediately viewable online. You can find a list of all the websites at <http://www.fredforest.org>.

Example no. 1

<http://www.fredforest.org/videoart/VideoArt.htm> (1995)

“De Casablanca à Locarno.” Mixed-media—Grand Prix de la ville de Locarno (TV+Radio+Cinema+Theater+Internet). As the website was initially hosted by the Swiss-Italian Television, I could only retrieve the homepage, after extended negotiations with the SRG SSR. A page survives as a trace. The links are inactive.

Example no. 2

<http://www.fredforest.org/drouot> (1996)

“Parcelle-Réseau.” As the webserver disappeared soon after the event, the website was to some extent recreated with the help of recovered elements.

Example no. 3

<http://www.fredforest.org/time> (1997)

“J’arrête le temps.” This website, made for the Fête de l’Internet twenty years ago, has stood up to time particularly well over its two decades of existence. Upon its creation, it was the subject of a public presentation at Pub Renault on the Champs-Élysées. The only feature that no longer works is the Kléline online payment system. You can still visit the website today... But it is no longer possible to pay for the seconds, minutes and hours that were intended for purchase to benefit a humanitarian organization, as the Kléline system, launched at the time, is now obsolete. Lastly, the numerous results from Sofres (a French survey institute) that were initially published on the website have been removed—surveys conducted on a daily basis, viewable in the form of pie charts. As the results were made available online on the Sofres website, access to this data via hyperlink was interrupted when our partnership agreement ended.

Example no. 4

<http://www.fredforest.org/temps/> (1997)

“La machine à travailler le temps.” Website created on the occasion of the opening of the Landowski Cultural Center in Boulogne-

Billancourt. When you reach the website's central element, which is the representation of the machine itself, activated by internet users, you see that the central part of the machine is hidden. When I contacted the company Micromania in order to fix this "machine" created by the company's programmers, I learned at my expense that it had changed activity. Despite all of the efforts undertaken — a veritable months-long police investigation to identify and find the developer who had created the website's codes (codes which are needed for it to be restored)— I was forced to concede defeat.

Example no. 5

<http://fredforest.net/viande/> (2002)

"Territoire du corps et des réseaux, le corps éclaté." This website now only allows users to cut off the head. They cannot claim any other body part —and the parts cut off one by one, gradually spread across the surface of the globe by buyers, can no longer be reincorporated into the website for the body's programmed "reforming." The website's dismemberment is due to the fact that I lost contact with the two amazing developers that built it at the time for pleasure —but as it is necessary to earn a living somehow, and my application for public support never led anywhere, the website thus had to be set aside!

Example no. 6

<http://www.fredforest.org/fete/> (2003)

"Grenoble au centre de la toile." This website, that has been partially restored, lost all of the basic features that represented its veritable appeal. Once again, financial reasons were what kept me from saving the website. One day, a programmer friend told me that anything was possible in his area to flesh out even the craziest of dreams, and on occasion demonstrated this to me. Anything is possible, as long as you're willing to pay the price —shelled out according to time spent, VAT not included!

Example no. 7

<http://www.fredforest.org/web-happening/>  
(2005)

"Digital Street Corner." This website, built around a one-time performance carried out with the Bass Museum in Miami on the occasion of Art Basel, naturally lost its features. But it has also lost the information on the menu, because the developer that I called upon for its creation proved unreliable in refusing to give me the codes necessary for its recovery.

Example no. 8

<http://www.fredforest.org/Ina> (2005)

"IMAGES-MÉMOIRE." This website, commissioned and hosted by INA (French National Audiovisual Institute), has now been waiting to be recovered for four years. It was

disabled by INA on the pretext that it represented a flaw in the security system and was likely to facilitate malicious invasions, after functioning perfectly for five years in uninterrupted fashion. According to INA's programmer, the techniques used at the time of its creation on the web are obsolete, and consequently, the website needs to be entirely redone. INA's administration says that it does not have the necessary budget to do so. The paradox is that INA, an institution charged with the *heritage duty* to preserve works by way of legal deposit, is here unable to ensure the conservation of a work that it commissioned and produced.

Examples no. 9, 10 and 11 could be followed by a long list. As a further remark, or to conclude, I will add that based on my personal experience, easy to extrapolate, the lack of maintenance and durability of digital works in their totality is more due to financial reasons than technical failures or impossibilities. Of the forty or so websites that I have put online, only four received public funding. The others were funded by the volunteer work of various players, with all of the vagaries that this implies —shoestring budgets, giving up, not having the means. This demonstrates (if there is any need to do so) the failure of public authorities in France in terms of research and creation, which as we know, has driven a number of brilliant minds abroad. Agreed-up budgets are often divided up arbitrarily, at best, by commissions ignorant of the issues at stake, and at worst, based on criteria resulting from power struggles or personal relations.

It is certain that changes in technologies are now upending the areas of artistic creation and raising questions of the conservation of works. We have no doubt that in time, some remedies for this situation will be found – unless in the future, artists and the public alike assume, admit and accept the transitory and ephemeral nature of these productions. This is by no means an idle fancy or even a utopia, given how these technologies are changing our forms of existence in the world, and ourselves, as a consequence.